

# ORPHANED COMPUTERS & GAME SYSTEMS

Volume II, Issue 8 February 1999

If you have visited the OC&GS website, you know that back issues are indexed to allow readers to view each article in ASCII format. This makes printing an article or two easy. But what if someone wants to print an entire issue? It becomes a messy process -- and it looks terrible after it is done. There may be a solution, but I would like reader input, especially from subscribers.

I have been translating back issues of OC&GS from the original Amiga *Pagestream* format to PDF files that can be read using Adobe *Acrobat Reader*. This completely preserves the format and appearance of the paper newsletter. A print-out of a back issue in PDF format looks exactly the same as an original *Pagestream* page. This seems an ideal way to distribute back issues of our newsletter online. But is it really? There may be some problems with this method.

First, what would be the point of subscribing? If in a few months the current issue is placed online in a printable format, what would be the incentive to subscribe? It isn't as if Chris and I make any money from subscriptions, but there is a good reason for them: feedback. Users who send us subscription forms almost always find a minute or two to jot down some thoughts. Without feedback, the newsletter would feel like a one-way communication. It would become stale for Chris and I.

Secondly, if we decided to

place back issues online in PDF format, how would subscribers feel? If I were a subscriber, I might feel cheated. OC&GS doesn't offer up-to-the-minute news on the video game industry. We are not a news magazine. Instead, we write articles commenting on the current and past state of gaming. It really makes no difference if an article is read while it is in the current issue or in six months.

What if there were a separate part of the website that could only be entered with a password? I'm not talking high-tech security here. This would just be an area where back issues in PDF format could be accessed. Perhaps there could be two different ways to subscribe: One would be the normal paper edition, and the other would be a cheaper online subscription. If this were the case, the current issue would be available online as well.

Without your input, a decision will be reached which you may find unsatisfactory. It is up to you to decide if you want to voice your opinion about the future back-issue format of this newsletter. -- AT

Hiya! You'll notice that nowhere in the above disclosure does Adam mention IBMs or Macs. He does insinuate that most people who read these tasty tomes on the 'Net are not using Amigas, because if they were, it would be more feasible to upload the original *Pagestream*-based

documents than to bother with all of this PDF nonsense. Adam likes the online-subscription idea more than I do, and I harbor the semi-secret opinion that he mainly just thinks that PDF files (which are postscript files, basically) are really neat. But, hey, if that's what you guys want, we'll do it. By making oneself available as a purveyor of entertainment (which is, after all, all that the media is, no matter what field is being covered), a writer automatically makes each reader his boss. Please take a second to let us know about these online ideas. We really need to know.

The reason I brought up IBMs and Macs earlier is that there are a couple articles in here about a certain related, infamous company. Hint: The articles aren't terribly flattering.

Some idiot in *Reader's Digest* really crossed Adam's line. As any good parent does, my colleague has pretty strong opinions about who can and can't tell his son what to do. I'm glad his lights came on for this one, because it yielded a fantastic article about violence in video games. I've always said that if a kid can't tell the difference between fantasy and reality, his family shouldn't even own a TV set, let alone a game system to plug into it. Now you can read Adam's end-all of articles about gaming violence.

Of course, there's other great stuff about our favorite classic systems...dig in and enjoy! -- CF

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This issue of *OC&GS* may be downloaded, in PDF of text format, from:  
<http://w3.tvi.cc.nm.us/~atrionfo>

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**Give this to your friends! Spread the word! We appreciate your help!**

If you would like to exchange your 'zine or newsletter, send it! We'll send the next *OC&GS*!

If you received this issue free, think about sending a buck for the next one. Suggestions are always welcome. What subjects would you like covered?

**If you want to contribute**, send us some stuff or e-mail text files to us. We love having other writers.

# UNHINGED

When Short Tempers  
Turn Make-Believe Into Reality  
by Chris Federico

"My high school friend and I rented *Archon* for the Nintendo," says Adam. "I didn't have a high opinion of it compared to the C-64 version, but we played, and I basically kept kicking his ass. I spent the night at his house. The next time I went over there, the Nintendo was making noises and acting strange. The computer had kept beating him at the game, so he'd jumped up and down on the cartridge and the system it was plugged into. The cart case was definitely broken, and he'd kind of taped it together. It rattled because of the loose pieces inside. I don't know if he ever returned it."

Now read another tale as accounted in a *Digital Press* special:

"I played and played (2600 *Solar Fox*) but couldn't get the 's' in 'Helios' (the 'hidden message' awarded to players who completed all of the bonus waves), and at some point, throwing the controllers down in anger wasn't enough. Yup. Out came the game, game flew at wall with unbelievable velocity, game shattered... At least a year or two passed, at which point, yes, I bought *Solar Fox* again... This time, when the temper tantrum resulted in a hurled cart, it didn't break. Hmmm..."<sup>1</sup>

I'm sure you've heard, seen or even been involved in similar incidents. Why are tempers and vicarious heroism so related?

That latter term itself actually provides us with an answer. When you think about it, how *couldn't* temper and vicarious incarnation cross paths? If someone really loves to play video games -- simulations of

invented reality -- he allows himself to get involved in the scenario being engaged by his onscreen counterpart. In certain parts of his mind, he is actually doing the things that the displayed hero is doing. It therefore means something to him if he does or doesn't achieve the game's (next) goal; it crosses over into reality, especially in the heat of the moment, before the scientific presence of the player in the real world manipulating a make-believe recreation occurs to him.

Everyone swears at a gaming loss or gets otherwise angry; but unreasonable, physical tantrums defy one's common sense and can really make him examine his own impulses, his own involvement with the fantasy-land he's voluntarily challenging. The only time I've been truly guilty of such a physical-world crossover was in 1983, at Uncle Cliff's Amusement Park. I was 11. There was a little game room there, and after I lost all of my lives in the tank phase in *Tron*, I hit the controller in frustration. It wobbled alarmingly, but it didn't break. I wondered to myself, "Am I a stupid person? You can't 'get even' with a *machine*!"

So what's the solution to this? The only one I can think of is to buy a few used Microsoft-driven machines. When you get angry at, say, an Atari game, vent your anger by turning just a bit and smashing the PC instead of the Atari. You'll thank yourself later. -- CF

<sup>1</sup> Dave Giarrusso, contributor to *Digital Press: Classic Video Games Collector's Guide*, 4th Edition. (C)1993, 94, 95, 96 by Joe Santulli. Excerpted by permission.

(*Digital Press* is published bi-monthly, six regular issues per year. Subscription rate for the US: \$10, Canada: \$12, Outside North America: \$16. Single-issue rate: \$2.)

# Sacrificing Your Life to Role-Playing Games

By Adam Trionfo

Is it really worth it? Throwing away hours, days or weeks because of one game? I'm not talking about getting addicted to a game and playing it over and over. I'm talking about a game in which one session lasts for weeks. People brag about playing *Final Fantasy VII* for 60 hours. What is the appeal of this? Wouldn't it be better to play sixty different games for an hour each?

More people are beginning to play role-playing games. Companies are promoting them because they are finally able to create the worlds that they have always imagined. I could once see their appeal, but no longer. When I was younger, I used to play games like *D&D*; I was actually quite addicted. It was a good way to pass my free time. Not only that, but traditional RPGs can be great social events. As I've matured, though, I have much less free time. I must split it between family, school and a host of other activities. I could never even play a computerized role-playing game all the way through. My life isn't a lamb: I'm not willing to sacrifice it to the gaming gods.

I always understood why RPGs were underground; there were few people who could stand to sit there in front of a game and save it over and over. I never expected RPGs to attain the mainstream status that they have now.

When *Zelda* was finally released for the N-64, I met some people who had beaten it in one week; it took some of them

eighty hours. Spending eighty hours in one week on one game is obviously devotion. It is a type that one would think most people do not possess. But anyone who plays *Zelda* or *Final Fantasy* all the way through does have this devotion. Maybe it takes some hardcores longer than others to finally beat these games, but I wonder what all of them sacrifice in order to do it?

The game companies should know better, too. If a game is sold that someone is going to play for months at a time, that person can't be sold another game for a while. I don't want companies to create games that I get bored of in an hour -- that isn't what I mean. The ideal game, as I've stated countless times, only takes a few minutes to play. Some games that work rather well in this category are shooters and platform games. I am able to complete a wave or level and understand the mechanics in a short while. Basically, I want to be able to play a game as fast as possible so I can get to the next game quickly!

Games like *Warcraft II*, *Starcraft*, *Quake* and *Age of Empires* are being played by people against other people from all over the world. This isn't a social activity in the common meaning, but it does make the gray matter function just a bit more than playing a preprogrammed scenario.

What can be improved about RPGs? If they are indeed too long, is there anything that can make them more fun to play? The gaming magazines have a field day slamming games that only take ten to twenty hours to complete. "Where is the replay value?" they ask. If a game has a short quest that can be beat in ten to twenty hours, this will please the gamer in the short time range. Any player who feels that he needs more bang for the buck

could continue to play, looking for secrets. Why not add side quests that might be discovered after the game has been beaten? The second quest in *The Legend of Zelda* is a perfect example of this (I know, *Zelda* is a pseudo-RPG).

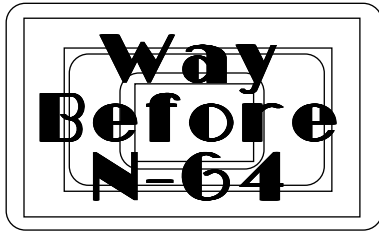
Role-playing games would benefit highly from the option for multi-player sessions. *Ultima Online* is a good step in this direction. Look what happens to these innovators, though: People sue them because they can't always be connected, or because they get kicked off on occasion. If you want something good, you must be prepared to weather the bad that will bring the good. A little patience is in order here. Don't destroy something that holds so much promise.

A major overhaul is required to get the musty smell out of these games. They continue to be little more than hack'n'slash garbage that has the player collecting the next item so that the item after that can be obtained. Right now, role-playing games are like books, except you can't skip past the boring parts. -- AT

## ATTENTION: Address change

We put this here instead of near the address bar on page 2 so that it would be more noticeable.

The apartment number in our address has changed (as has Adam's e-mail address). Thanks for looking at this box. This box hopes to serve you with more life-easing information in the future. -BOX ENDS-



## An Old System Through New Eyes

by Chris Federico

I haven't had much experience with the first Nintendo, the NES (N. Entertainment System). It's one machine I've never owned or really gotten into, despite mastering *Castlevania* and sharpening my *Metroid* skills in the late '80s on my younger brother's system, and ruling the *Super Mario Bros. 3* world in the early '90s when my friends installed it on the TV in our first apartment away from home.

When Adam bestowed a Nintendo upon me this Xmas, he included every game I'd mentioned as a favorite over the past couple of years, along with *The Legend of Zelda* (a game Adam has wanted me to try out for some time, since he knows I love action/adventure games) and its sequel. Featured below are some fresh perceptions on titles that have come back out of my past to tint the present gaming environment.

I thought for years that *Zelda* might be a multi-screen hack'n'slash masquerading as an adventure game, but I find now that it actually is an adventure, requiring hours of exploration (my favorite aspect in a game) and some major long-term planning. For being a game laden with so many enemies, it fortunately has quite a lack of cop-out bad-guy addition; in fact, there's only one (the recurrent

bitch in the lake).

One thing I definitely disagree with is the saving method. I much prefer passwords to an internal battery with a limited life. It was supposed to last only five years; the one in Adam's own cart and the one he gave me have both lasted much longer than that (obviously; they still work), but why did they settle on a short-term saving method when passwords can be used for the duration of a cartridge's life? And they obviously knew it was a sensitive battery -- there's even a warning on the screen, instructing the player to hold RESET as the system's being turned off to forestall inadvertent memory loss. I've even lost saved games to the problem every NES eventually develops, when you have to insert a cartridge as far out as it will go, scraping the inner-front edge of the port as you push the game in, if you want it to turn on properly. If this doesn't work the first couple times with *Zelda* (it doesn't work the first couple times with *most* carts), your saved games are erased for some reason. The battery being that fragile, why didn't they just use the much more surefire password method?

Besides that non-play element, however, *Zelda* is terrific. I've already found that there are stretches of days during which I don't want to play anything else; the addiction factor is certainly there, but along with it comes a stout degree of frustration. But the favorable difference between *Zelda*'s paining battles and the high-temper level of other games with that ingredient is that with practice, anything in *Zelda* can be conquered. This adds to its addictive fiber; throw in the searches over river, mountain and waterfall and treks through forest, desert and maze for people who will sell secrets about the

kingdom, merchants with vital weaponry and healing agents, successively powerful swords, hidden caves and stairways found by bomb or fire, environ-expanding vehicles and in fact the castle-like inner levels themselves, and you have a game that's very hard to stop playing. Despite the different "camera angle," I dub this the first *Doom* predecessor, more so than any simpler top-down shooter that doesn't have such a dimension of exploration or map-memorization.

On a few occasions I mentioned to Adam that I'd loved *Castlevania* when I was younger. In retrospection, it's more likely that I just spent a lot of time on it.

It's a great game with a great setting and fun mechanics; I can't imagine the Nintendo without the facility to appease the periodic urge to whip the hell out of bad guys coming from both sides, spinning around with stealth and shattering them, and to pulverize the occasional weak wall block. But as a game to follow through until you beat the end, it has a high rate of frustration, almost (but not quite) reimbursed by the permission to continue the game to heart's content.

There are two main problems: First, the game gets more and more linear, calling in higher levels for exact steps to be taken at exact places through nearly every vicinity. This turns the fun exploration of castles into a narrow path through redundant hazards. Secondly, if you whip a baddie at the same time he collides with you, you both win, which means *he* wins; he does dissolve, but you also fly back a couple inches, making the careful jumps from surface to surface over precipitous drops (the majority of the game) inconsequential. You've balanced all that way, and you've whipped this meanie in time, but

it's come to nothing and you watch Simon fall to his death.

*Metroid* is an excellent idea with top-notch mechanics, an irresistible audio-visual setting and excessively fun shoot-'em-up qualities combined with the thrill of wide-scale exploration; but it's incredibly hard due to the requirement of repeated slayings of the same bad guys over and over to build up your easily-lost energy. Again, I can't imagine the world of gaming without this great concept and fantastic execution, but it's just too repetitive and hence frustrating to play to the end.

Of the three *Super Mario Bros.* games, only the third one stands out as utterly fantastic. The first game captured my rapt attention when I found it as a coin-op in the '80s; I thought it was the greatest thing I'd ever seen. I played it over and over, getting further and further each time (the mark of a well-designed game) and trying fanatically to remember where everything was concealed. So it's a great game, of course; but the enormity and extra control offered by the third game completely wiped out the prequel for me.

You can travel backwards now, and the extra dimension this adds, especially coupled with the other supremacy of this installment, the mind-blowing magnitude of secrets, makes this one of the few follow-ups in gaming history to succeed its originator so much as to completely antiquate it. You can in fact go backwards in the second game, and it has some really neat ideas, such as the picking-up-and-throwing concept, the egg-hurling mama-saurs and the doorway dimensions with their veiled power-ups; but it gets repetitive very quickly (and do we really need two of those damn desert worlds?). For his part, Adam

doesn't even consider this a proper Mario game. I can see his point; what do you jump up and hit? Where's all the hidden stuff?

The third episode contains the best of so many elements that I'd be willing to vote for it as the greatest video game of all time rather than *Next Generation's* initial pick, *Super Mario 64*. That game's beautiful, and as the first model of its mechanical setting it remains the peak of innovation; but it gets boring very quickly and becomes maddening in certain isolated places, and the camera angles weren't thought-through enough.

Controller-wise, the NES's pads were revolutionary, prescribing what would become the standard scheme. But from a technical standpoint, the machine itself is an 8-bit horror that's limited to program, and it therefore saw a smaller amount of impressive games than its industry-giant precursor (the Atari 2600). But when a programmer threw his heart into the creation of a game, the machine really did shine above and beyond its peers. There are very few games in existence that are quite as addictive as one of the really good NES titles; when a programmer approached the machine correctly, even just its purely mechanical side moved characters incredibly smoothly and detected collisions flawlessly. The bad titles are limited-feeling and forgettable, but the great games are *really* great, and therein lies the magical potion that boosted this first Nintendo system's popularity over the top and continues to re-establish its place as an enduring classic. -- CF

# Easter Egg Update

by Chris Federico

I found information about yet another secret in an Atari 2600 game to add to our growing list. This one concerns *Fathom*, Rob Fulop's unique action/adventure game that was released by Imagic.

Gamer Chuck Hunnefield discovered the secret and has duly had his instructions presented on the Internet. Here's the method, paraphrased:

Complete level 1. During the second level, acquire all of the Trident pieces and approach the mermaid's cage as though you're going to rescue her again. Unlock the cage and quickly head upward before it completely opens, exiting the screen.

Now you have to re-emerge way up at the surface of the water and become the seagull. Fly east or west and look at the volcanoes! R.F. is of course Mr. Fulop; M.B. is Michael Becker, the fella that helped out with the graphics. His computerized illustration of a dolphin jumping out of the water was actually what inspired Mr. Fulop to make the game.

Remember, if anyone has information about an Easter egg that hasn't appeared in these pages, please write or e-mail and explain it. We'll credit you, as you can see. An especially sought-after secret is the rumored *Solaris* one. Any leads?-- CF

# Why Microsoft Sucks

by Chris Federico

As I write this on my Amiga 2500, the IBM clone that was recently given to me is sitting a few feet away, attempting to power up. I got on Yahoo! Chat a few days ago and tonight I thought it might be neat to participate again for a little while. In the time it's taken me to turn on the Amiga, wait for the Workbench to load, load this word processing application (*Excellence!*) and type to this point, the *Windows* '98 title screen has stayed up. It's starting up, you see. It's the first popularly awaited upgrade in the history of home computing to run **slower** than its predecessor, and yet **people still buy it**.

Ah! There it goes. Attaboy. Now to try and load *Explorer* and get the chat applet running without experiencing any lock-ups. Should be fun.

Adam says that the reason it takes '98 so long to start is that it needs more RAM than '95 did. I don't have enough RAM for everything '98 does when it starts up, so it's using my hard disk to store temporary data. Microsoft instituted this "upgrade," in my learned opinion, to force people to buy more RAM, more chips, more everything. It's an altogether commercial corporation. The love of hacking, the fascination with the possibilities inherent in bringing computers into the homes of laymen, is gone.

Back in the heyday of the Commodore 64 and Atari 8-bits, the late-'70s Apple mentality was still rampant: Those who made the machines, operating systems and software were excited about the craft to such an extent that

sales, while still vital for obvious reasons, weren't the impetus behind their dogged pioneering. They stood behind their products, remained proud of them for years and squeezed every drop of potential out of them.

Now, thanks to Microsoft and to a slightly lesser extent Intel (who makes the Pentium chips), that moonstruck community is extinct as far as modern computing goes. It's all saleability: goading the customer into buying "bigger and faster." There's no exploring or revolutionizing to be done because chips and software become obsolete -- deliberately -- within months of being issued. I wouldn't be surprised to learn of a cooperative crossover deal between Microsoft and Intel.

Never mind Microsoft's monopoly; that's another whole subject in itself, one that's covered amply in the mainstream press due to government lawsuits against Mr. Gates. I'm happy that those suits exist (or is it obvious?).

But how about the products themselves? Now that Microsoft has muscled its way onto every IBM and clone on a variety of levels, and sold its flash to every new computing enthusiast thanks to the lingering naivete of the average consumer, can we at least find more good things than bad about the magic potion that Mr. Bill's Traveling Show has preached about?

Nope. For one thing, the hard drive keeps going and going. You can't move the damn mouse pointer without hearing that annoying muted clacking. What the hell is it loading all the time? It gets in the way of operation; half the time, double-clicking on an icon won't execute its program because the OS thought you only single-clicked, because it was busy doing that mysterious pseudo-disk-access (there are technical reasons for

this, but none offer any defense; suffice to say that nearly every intentionally memory-intensive *Windows* program that's been released is trying to work with the antiquated, slow *MS-DOS* that's hiding behind it). The way *Windows* accesses the hard disk is cumbersome and inefficient.

Another thing: All of these lock-ups aren't necessary. I'll repeat that for the morons at work who think they're computer programmers because they figured out how to change the font size in *Word*: IT'S NOT A NATURAL FUNCTION OF COMPUTERS TO LOCK-UP CONSTANTLY.

Chat didn't work, by the way. It's locked-up. I'm serious. It's convenient timing, considering the subject material of this article, but now I have to reset the computer.

That's another thing. Why the hell should I have to read a message telling me I didn't shut my OS down "properly?" There's an on/off switch. What else do you need, y'know? And you're going to tell me that this is well-written software? And the *coup-de-grace*: If you shut down "correctly," you get large, important letters stating, "It is now safe to turn off your computer." Oh, THANK YOU, High and Exalted Mystery Machine! Don't explode or anything, okay? It's an intimidation factor that was researched and tested by Microsoft's marketing division. Make people feel that their computers are intimidating machines controlling them, instead of the other way around, and you won't have those annoying bursts of independent creativity that could jeopardize big, blanketing companies like Microsoft.

I'll conclude with just one sentence: Support your local Amiga users' groups. -- CF

# On Bashing Microsoft

By Adam Trionfo

I bought a music CD yesterday and listened to it; it sounded great. I listened to it again this morning and, not surprisingly, it was just as good. This afternoon I wanted to listen to it again -- but it would not play! All of my other discs worked fine in the CD player, but not this new one. I contacted the company who made the CD player -- they had no idea why my disc would not work. They suggested that I make sure the CD hadn't been damaged. I didn't think it had been, but I checked anyway. There were no scratches or marks. I brought it to a friend's house and it worked fine there. Strange!

I decided to contact the recording artist's record label. Would you believe it! It turns out that the CD isn't quite compatible with all stereo set-ups! Isn't that amazing? I'm told that I probably need bigger speakers, a larger volume control knob and a brown case (instead of my old black one). I need to upgrade to these things if I plan to continue to listen to this new CD I bought. After being told all of this, I insisted that the CD worked fine yesterday and this morning. They treated me like a fool, insisting that a new stereo was the only possible solution.

Now, wait a minute! Obviously, the preceding story isn't true, although I bet it sounds familiar if you have ever spoken to someone in electronics

customer service. Just imagine what it would be like trying to listen to your favorite music if you had to upgrade or purchase a new stereo system every year or so! Or what if your favorite CD crashed for no reason that you caused? It would be outrageous!

Any music CD that I could purchase would play on any CD player. There would be no need to worry about whether or not the current player is compatible with the new CD. It just doesn't work that way. There is a standard, and the music industry sticks to it. How come computers don't work that way? A music CD is comparable to a single-speed CD-ROM drive. Do you know anyone who would purposely purchase a new single-speed computer drive? But people purchase new single-speed music CD players all the time. A CD player bought tomorrow will play the same disc as one bought in 1984. It is that simple.

Each of us gets irritated by products that we all use, be they microwaves, stereos, TVs or computers. In the last few years, people have been spending more time in front of computers. We talk about them with other people. If some software works well, we say good things about it; if it doesn't work all the time, we complain. It is a natural thing to do. If our hardware doesn't work perfectly, we complain about that as well.

It just so happens that most of the software that people use are products of Microsoft. If we have a hard time with Joe Blow's Plumbing, we are going to bash his company name. So it is with Microsoft. When you use a Microsoft product, after a while it will crash, or at least do something unexpected and unpleasant. We get angry. We fume. We might do a bit of cussing and swearing, either under our breaths or quite loudly. We tell our friends about our

computer software troubles. What we are doing is Microsoft-bashing. It feels great! But there is a problem with this.

In the workplace, I have heard people complain about *Windows*, *Word* or <insert your hated Microsoft product here> all the time. This might be because of the loss of part of a document, or maybe a failed download, or perhaps an incomplete or failed installation. These are typical happenings around an office every day. What about those crashes that happen less often but are much worse? How about a new program that changes the *Windows* registry and causes it to conflict with another program? A *Windows* machine might not even boot after something like that. I hope you have a registry back-up; otherwise, you are in deep trouble. There are reasons to do a little bit (maybe even a lot) of Microsoft-bashing. It never does any good, though.

Microsoft continues to churn out products that are aimed at the computer novice. There isn't anything wrong with this, really. But there *is* something the matter with programs that are shipped with bugs that can cause people to lose data. I'm not picking on any specific product, or even only Microsoft. Look at the Coleco ADAM, for example. The word processor that it shipped with in ROM had some of the worst bugs I have ever seen. The keyboard would lock, the screen would get garbled and complete sentences or paragraphs would disappear to the bit bucket. To Coleco's credit, these bugs were ironed out in later ROM releases; but it was too late for the ADAM, and Coleco was dragged down with the only reasonable console computer upgrade ever made.

How come when a bugged Microsoft product ships, users just shrug their shoulders and

wait for the new version that fixes the bugs (and, inevitably, introduces others)? There are alternatives to Microsoft. Even if one must remain a *Windows* user (highly likely), there are equivalent programs to every existing Microsoft product. Some commercial software is worse than the equivalent Microsoft product, some is about equal and some is better. Free *Unix* clones, like *Linux* and *FreeBSD*, are great alternatives to a user who doesn't need *Windows* (and doesn't mind investing some time and learning a bit about computers).

Take a look around at Microsoft alternatives on the PC platform. You could even jump to a different platform altogether, like an Apple Macintosh. If you don't like what you see elsewhere, Microsoft will still be here -- I promise. But it is important to give other products a try. If, in the end, you enjoy Microsoft products above others, there is a bonus: You can gather in small groups and do some Microsoft-bashing when your OS or program crashes! It might not do any good, but it sure is fun!

-- AT

## Fast Graphics? No! TurboGrafx, Baby!

By Adam Trionfo

When the Nintendo 8-bit ruled the world, it was all that the average gamer required. But NEC thought differently. They believed that the public wanted a better machine, one that would whip the little NES back to nursery school. Their TurboGrafx 16 was the answer. Unfortunately, it wasn't really the solution.

The gaming public didn't take to the machine very well, at least not here in the United States. But can you blame them? It was released with a horrible little game called *Keith Courage*. The game had excellent graphics and far more colors than the Nintendo, but there was no game-play value. Basically, it was a demo that you could play. There was no comparison between it and the game that sold the NES -- *Super Mario*.

The TurboGrafx 16 was released just prior to the Sega Genesis in 1989. It was advertised as the first 16-bit system, even though it only had 16-bit **graphics** (meaning more colors). It was only slightly faster than the NES. Oh, but the difference a few colors can make! The TurboGrafx 16 graced gamers' screens with the best graphics on any system until the release of the 32-bit consoles over five years later. That is quite an achievement for a system regarded by most as inferior. But why was it seen as substandard in the first place?

The first batch of games in the US didn't look any better than Nintendo games. Characters were the same size, and in most cases even the color palette wasn't much greater. This is what people saw, and this is what they remembered. The system was therefore no big deal; it never did catch on. It was the equivalent of owning an Intellivision when the Atari VCS was the platform of choice: The TurboGrafx may have been superior, but all of the good games were being created for the technically inferior NES platform.

The TurboGrafx has the distinction of being the first console with a CD-ROM drive. Unlike those who bought games in the initial card format, most people were fairly impressed by the first few CD games; but the

CD-ROM drive was very expensive and there was little hope that it would give NEC's system the push it needed. A great game was needed to boost sales, but there didn't seem to be one in sight.

Finally, two games were released that were like revelations. *Bomberman* and *Bonk's Adventure* proved that the TurboGrafx 16 was a viable machine. Although NEC did an admirable job at promoting the system once the good games started to be released, it was all too late. The early titles had tainted the water and there was nothing that NEC could do about it. The US market was lost.

Meanwhile, strangely enough, the machine did more than just survive in Japan -- it thrived. It sold in large numbers and gained a great amount of support. The system really caught on. Many of the best games are available only as import Hu-Cards (cartridges).

My favorite shooter on any system is called *Gate of Thunder* and is only available as a Super CD-ROM for the TurboGrafx CD system with added memory. The system really excelled at shooters. Think about it: It could show 512 colors on the screen at once, far more than any other system of the period. The graphics were simply incredible. It was the speed that showed the system's weakness. But with careful placement of graphics, the 8-bit processor was more than able to handle anything that was thrown at it.

While hardcore gamers enjoyed some of the best games of the time, most people were locked into the NES mentality. It's a shame, because the TurboGrafx 16 is really exciting and deserves to be recognized as an innovative platform that succeeded in introducing some of the best games of the 16-bit era.

-- AT



# Nolan's Secret Quest

by  
Chris  
Federico

**S**uperman, Adventure, Haunted House, Raiders of the Lost Ark, E.T., Dark Chambers... a big chunk of Atari's legacy constitutes multi-screen or scrolling adventure games, and the fabulous thing about all of them is that their balance between action and brainwork is optimum. In most gamers' minds, this genre probably stands out beyond all of Atari's other creations for their own machine. Taking all of this into account, it's not surprising that the Atari 2600's inventor marked his return to the industry with an adventure game.

Nolan Bushnell has been responsible for a lot of joyous times. Not only did he found Atari, but he designed *Computer Space*, the first coin-operated video game, and created the Pizza-Time Theater stores around the nation (which contained sizeable video game arcades). But for at least five years, our hero was all but completely kept out of the industry.

In 1977, before Bushnell and his coworkers knew how big the 2600 was going to be, financial problems drove him to sell the company to its parent, Warner Communications. Challenges by Bushnell concerning Warner's plans for Atari led to him being fired, and he could no longer release games for Atari *or* any competing companies (which, by Warner's

definition, meant *anybody else*). Until 1982, I believe it was, the man who started it all had to watch from a distance.

But the pro outcome was that he had a few years to program something, able to draw from the successive technological tricks and discoveries made by other programmers as the average 2600 game got better and better. When Bushnell re-emerged, Sente, his new company, was formed. He designed a 2600 game that was eventually released by Atari (I assume that they simply bought the game from him). The revolutionist's masterstroke wasn't released until the late '80s, meaning that it tragically missed the 2600's popular era; but for us lingering classic machine fans, it stands as the apogee of Atari's adventure annals, combining many of the best elements seen in multi-screen games over the years.

*Secret Quest*, devised in seclusion and kept from the public for years for one pencil-pusher's reason or another's, duly traps the player in a series of cold and lonely space stations, here introduced as logical successors to the old castles and dungeons. Each station comprises a multi-level maze of rooms, and they get harder and harder to navigate as you go on -- it's just like a good game should be. It's not something you can beat overnight. It's also the only non-SuperCharger 2600 game that I know of to use passwords (to return to your last place in the game).

The successive quality is very thoroughly employed throughout the game; you don't graduate to better weapons for many levels at a time, and the bad guys get gradually harder and harder to obliterate. Bushnell cleverly keeps the player from simply dashing through a room that contains a sneaky enemy by tendering vital supplies -- energy

and oxygen -- only upon the destruction of a baddie.

The playfield recalls *Adventure* -- simple, exciting, raw walls with openings in them indicate exits to similar rooms. The square explorer has been replaced with an animated humanoid figure, resplendent in his deliciously science-fictionish spacesuit. As in *Haunted House*, higher or lower floors are accessed by finding staircases in the corners of certain rooms. An additional floor is added every time the player blows up a station and progresses to the next. A station is destroyed by properly entering a code into its self-destruct computer, which you have to locate. The code itself grows by one symbol per station; each floor contains one symbol of the code. Once it's entered, a clock starts ticking down and you have to find the exit and get out of the station before you go kaplooey with it. There's just so much here.

Interestingly, there are no shoot-outs in the game; the swordfighting element of the classic definition of "adventure game" has arrived intact in the form of hand-to-hand combat with something that looks like a Light Saber. One strategy that makes this game pretty unique is that you can't be wild with your weapon; every time you lash it forward, it uses up a bit of your limited supply of energy. It's akin to running out of ammunition, and it makes the battles more strategic than anything resembling tiresome hack'n'slash. Enemies have quite a lot of dodge-and-strike intelligence (or at least *seem* to, which declares great programming skill anyway).

A great game from the daddy of gaming himself, this will hopefully be rediscovered for years to come by fans of games that truly deserve the description "classic." -- CF

# A Strange Middle-Ground

## The 5200's Place In the Gaming World

by Chris Federico

What I remember most about the 1982 advent of the Atari 5200 (or "SuperSystem") is that its promotion was centered around its ability to play reasonably accurate home adaptations of popular coin-ops. Coleco got into the licensing game late and, with the exception of *Donkey Kong*, had to bring home less popular coin-ops (what Adam likes to call "sleepers"); but like them, Atari was aware of gamers' dissatisfaction with the arcade translations that had appeared for the 2600 up to that point, and they used the 5200 to grab enthusiasts who wanted more faithful quarter-eater renditions.

But what this led to, in the case of the 5200, is interesting: It's the system with the fewest platform-exclusive games. Sure, the ColecoVision's library is at least 80% arcade translations as opposed to original games, but many aren't available for other machines (*Frenzy*, *Cosmic Avenger*, *Ladybug* and *Victory*, to name but a few). What does the 5200 offer that isn't available for other systems? The difficult yet somehow fascinating *Countermeasure* and the spectacular *Space Dungeon* adaptation. That's about it, barring a few prototypes.

Granted, there's a reason for this: The 5200 was easy to adapt games to, because it was an Atari 600 without a keyboard. Plug in virtually any 5200 game that's also available for the 8-bit, no matter which company released the title, and you'll realize that it's the same on both machines. This really sinks in when you use

the Masterplay interface, an adaptor that enables the 5200 to support a 2600 joystick. One realizes that the analog controller is the only thing that makes any of the games feel different than when played on an 8-bit computer. There are exceptions: *Popeye* and *Berzerk* are two games among the few that offer minor differences between the two platforms. But for the most part, the coding journey from the 600 to the 5200 involved little more than burning disk contents onto a cartridge ROM.

The 2600 supports digital sticks (each direction is either on or off, i.e. 1 or 0), while the 5200 requires its own special analog sticks (returning a value for every little position in which the stick can be placed). The analog controller is insulted a lot, mainly because it doesn't automatically center; but think about how unique it was in that early gaming era. Some programmers did actually capitalize on its science, making certain games better for having been rewritten specifically with the analog controller in mind. *Super Breakout* and *Kaboom!* use the stick's ability to detect how far the player's pushing, giving more minute control than the 2600's awkward paddle controllers; and the only thing that tops the analog stick in the cases of *Centipede* and *Missile Command* is the trak-ball itself.

However, this microscopic detection was applied where unnecessary in certain vertical shooters (CBS Electronics's reading of *Gorf* immediately comes to mind), making them much harder than if only the direction itself were detected. *Gyruss*, inversely, could have really benefitted from strict analog-style detection, giving the player the ability to rotate in a literal fashion around the playfield's perimeter; but Parker Bros. took the easy way out and

just directly ported their 8-bit version, trying to make a 2600-style control scheme work within the analog system and therefore making the game cumbersome. To their credit, they actually let the player opt to exclude the joystick altogether in *Frogger* and its sequel, allowing the hopping hero to be controlled with the keypad numbers on the controller.

I don't perceive the 5200 joystick as the problem it's made out to be. I simply avoid the games it hampers even after a feel for the control is attained, like maze games; I just load them up on the 8-bit when I get that little ache to play them. The analog rod is certainly better than the Intellivision controller, for instance. So the problem isn't really the design and control scheme of the joystick; it's the fragility. Finding a working 5200 controller is among the more difficult errands in the classic gaming hobby. The sticks wear out or internally break far too easily. Adam actually had to get two repaired to gift me with a complete system. He could have just given me one, had he not wanted to provide me with the enjoyment of *Robotron: 2084* and *Space Dungeon*. They're two of the best games on the SuperSystem, and their superior control methods require the manipulation of two joysticks simultaneously (one for movement and one for firing direction). They're held fast by a plastic double-bracket that was included in the original game packages. Unless a player accomplishes the difficult feat of finding two well-working controllers, these two superb games can't be played.

The 5200 joystick was definitely a pioneer in efficiency; START, PAUSE and RESET are all there at your fingers. A little harder to find, tiny and hidden as it is on the back of the controller,

is the AUTO-CENTERING button. (Made ya look!) Two sticks can be stored in the mammoth unit itself, although they're difficult to fit because there's not quite enough room. The common cord-dangling problem is solved well, though; you can wrap it in a snug furrow underneath. One really weird thing about early 5200s is that the power cord plugs into the TV hookup box instead of the machine itself. I'm not sure what this was supposed to accomplish.

What 5200 owners basically had was a machine that was somewhere between an 8-bit computer and a game system that was remarkable for its era. What they didn't have was what it was ballyhooed as: a new-generation box superior to everything that came before. Those with 5200s could conceivably be called 8-bit owners, from a gaming standpoint; if they bought 600s but only cared about the games and the potential of the game-related qualities, they may as well have bought 5200s. The SuperSystem holds a unique place in gaming history, as it's the only successful box that can be considered by fans of the classics to harbor game quality equal to that of its keyboard-laden forerunner. It goes to show us that *form* was an aspect that companies had to take into account when targeting an audience for its systems. Why didn't Atari just drop the price of the aging 8-bit and let fly with a new campaign for it, aimed at game fans? Because programmers and would-be programmers wanted their computers to appear "proper," and certainly not like toys; and game-players wanted a system to plug their cartridges into without worrying about any "complications."

And it hasn't changed. The processor in the Nintendo 64 has a bit width identical to that of the

early Pentium chips, but people in our culture have been too saturated with customs of decor to buy complex-looking computers if they just want to sit down and play action games, or use science-fictiony game systems that might be outfitted with keyboards, drives and extra RAM. And other people want to feel like they own COMPUTERS, dammit, and those computers better be singular-colored on the outside and look professional among the office furniture.

It's a good thing that the average video game isn't as boring as the average person. Maybe that's why so many of us love that other world, the one behind the screen.

The 5200 looks good onscreen as well as off; it's smooth from both angles. Hook it up and join the superior ranks of the early gaming world; just a little practice with the analog stick yields high rewards, and you'll rediscover one palpable advantage it has over the 8-bit: You never have to wait on the disk drive. -- CF

## Doesn't Anyone Have Gas?

Two issues ago, we posted a blurb about a new contest we were having, spawned by a reader letter mentioning the fart-like sound of a strike in the Fairchild Bowling game. We asked that readers send in any farting moments they could remember in the extensive library of classic video or computer games. Last issue, we printed a reminder, since we'd only gotten one response. Now you know how many we've gotten? Two!

Come on, professional gaming cohorts! E-mail or send us brief descriptions of any farting sounds you'd like to enlighten us on. We're

hoping to write a whole article about them (with mention of the contributors, of course). Thanks!

-- CF

## Wanted For Trade Atari XEP80

I'm looking for an XEP80. It would be a big plus if *Atariwriter 80* were included. I'm rather doubtful about the quality of the product, so I would rather make a trade with someone who wants to part with one that they already have.

The Atari XEP80 is a small box that plugs into either joystick port, giving the Atari 8-bit access to an 80-column display when used with a quality monochrome monitor. It came out in the late eighties and was not highly regarded; it was seen as too little too late. The display is very blurry unless the XEP80 is used with a monochrome monitor. Apparently, even a quality color monitor will give poor results. What's worse is that the display is very slow. Nobody seemed pleased at the time. Only a few Atari 8-bit enthusiasts bought this device after its many poor reviews in the various magazines.

Over the years, people did work with the device. Bob Buff's terminal program *BobTerm* will use it, although it will start to drop characters after 2400 baud if the internal XEP80 device handler is used. I have read that replacing the handler with the *SpartaDOS* handler will allow up to 9600 baud.

It is terminal communications and, to a smaller extent, 80-column text editing that draws me to this device. While I already have an 80-column display using *Omnimon-80*, it is of rather poor quality, and there are only a very few programs that have been written for it (I have two). I'm hoping that the XEP80 will allow me to use *BobTerm* to its fullest extent.

The XEP80 might not be exactly what I'm looking for, but it does give an 80-column display, which, if readable, will be a great help to me and my terminal communication efforts. I have a large range of 8-bits as well as other computers and console items for trade. I'd love to have a reader work out a trade with me. What do you say? -- AT

# Violence in Video Games

## Too Real?

By Adam Trionfo

The January 1999 issue of *Reader's Digest* contains a "special report" called "Computer Violence: Are Your Kids At Risk?" The author, Stephen Barr, feels compelled to place a strict rating system on video games. For game players like myself, Barr's text is a scary insight into the mind of someone who would push closed the doors of free expression.

First let me set the record straight. Though I do enjoy *Quake*- and *Doom*-type games, I would not consider myself a fan of violent video games. I despise fighting games -- memorization is the key to the game-play. They have more in common with games like *Memory* or *Concentration* than actual video games. I don't understand the appeal of watching blood splatter across the screen; it seems like a cheap way for a game to get attention. But I would not make the choice for another person. There is no reason for a law that would prohibit a thirteen-year-old from purchasing a violent video game. This is just a sample of what Barr proposes. What is on his agenda after that? The outlawing of kids buying water pistols and army men?

The article begins by describing a killing. It isn't until a few paragraphs have passed that you realize that no real violence has occurred. Instead, Barr is describing a session of the Nintendo 64 title *Goldeneye* as played by two boys, aged ten and twelve. This is Barr's attempt to mislead the reader into having an initial negative attitude toward

video games. Barr quotes the father of the two boys: "I'm not going to invite somebody into my house to teach kids to kill." Barr uses this example as a springboard for propounding a rating system that would make it illegal to rent mature (i.e. violent) games to minors.

An introduction to the video game rating system that was established in 1994 is given. Not mentioned is that Nintendo was still the family-type game company at that time. They helped to pressure Congress into adopting a video game rating system to, in my opinion, help them fight the third-party games that were making so much money. Since then, Nintendo has dropped that unprofitable family image. I wonder if they might have any regrets.

Barr runs an experiment in which a ten-year-old boy is sent into various stores to rent or buy games that are rated "M" (age 17 or above). The boy is able to rent or buy the following games without any problems: *Mortal Kombat IV*, *Resident Evil II* and *Parasite Eve*. It seems that any kid can rent violent games "as long as they elude parental supervision." This infuriates Barr, who obviously feels that parents don't have the time to see what their children are up to.

Barr does seem to like the existing rating system; he just doesn't like the fact that a store can't be held accountable if a child purchases a violent game. He sidesteps what the store might be held accountable for -- murder, suicide, rape? He never says. It seems that Barr has partaken of the same attitude that began the backlash against so-called Satanic music in the early eighties. Like video games, people tried to hold music accountable for what their sons and daughters did. Ozzy Osbourne was even taken to court following a teenager's suicide,

just because the boy had listened to Osbourne's music (Osbourne was not held responsible). This nonsense will begin to happen to video game companies if laws are passed that push the responsibility from a parent's shoulders onto the government's.

As a parent myself, I understand that I must make decisions about what I let my son play. I try to steer him clear of violent games, not because of some rating system but because I watch him play and then I decide for myself. Dominic has an imagination. He runs up and down the hallway shooting at "bad guys," pretending to be in *Star Wars*. If it were the 1950s, I'm sure that he would be shooting "bad guys" while pretending to be Buck Rogers. I'm not going to stop him from pretending. He even goes running around the house shooting monsters from *Doom* or *Quake*; this doesn't worry me. It is all make-pretend. But you know what *does* worry me? When he pretends he is a policeman and shoots the "bad guys." Now, where did he get a crazy idea like that? A law will be acceptable that allows the prosecution of video game companies only when a law is passed that lets me sue the government for allowing violence to happen on the street and during war. -- AT

SEeya  
NEXT  
TIME!